



Wecht indicted by grand jury

Medical examiner accused of public use, private gain

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By Paula Reed Ward, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

After a yearlong investigation, a federal grand jury yesterday indicted nationally renowned Allegheny County Medical Examiner Dr. Cyril H. Wecht on charges that he misused his public office for private gain.

The 84-count indictment, which outlines charges of mail and wire fraud, also accuses Dr. Wecht of trading unclaimed bodies in exchange for use of lab space at Carlow University.

Though defense lawyers put Dr. Wecht under a strict order not to speak publicly, as he exited his offices yesterday, he assured reporters he was innocent. He reiterated that position last night when reached at his home.

"I wasn't going to evade that question," he said. "What am I going to say?"

Dr. Wecht, who gained a national reputation on cases that included the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the still-unsolved slaying of JonBenet Ramsey, said last night he has received calls of support from friends and associates around the country.

"The phone's been ringing off the hook," he said.

With the indictment, Dr. Wecht now also finds himself out of a county job. When he was appointed the first medical examiner in Allegheny County earlier this month, Dr. Wecht agreed to resign immediately if indicted. County Chief Executive Dan Onorato yesterday accepted a letter of resignation that had been written in advance and placed on file.

Dr. Abdulrezak Shakir, a forensic pathologist who has been with the county since 1988, was named acting medical examiner.

Mark Rush, one of three defense lawyers, said Dr. Wecht will vigorously fight the charges.



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan discusses the 84 indictments against Dr. Cyril H. Wecht during a news conference yesterday at the Federal Courthouse in Pittsburgh.

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Indictment

■ [Read the full text of the Cyril Wecht indictment as an Adobe Acrobat file](#)

Dr. Wecht also is represented by former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh and former U.S. Attorney J. Alan Johnson.

The 39-page indictment outlines dozens of counts against Dr. Wecht, 74, who investigators say billed private clients of his business, Cyril H. Wecht and Pathology Associates Inc., for expenses he illegally charged to Allegheny County.

U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan outlined the indictment at a news conference yesterday, including a charge that Dr. Wecht provided bodies that went unclaimed at the coroner's office for use as cadavers in the forensic sciences program at Carlow University. The government said the bodies were provided at no cost in exchange for lab space for his private practice.

A cadaver typically costs between \$1,800 and \$4,000.

Ms. Buchanan would not say how many bodies were involved but that there were several each month. The indictment said the practice went on from June 2003 to December 2005.

"Cyril Wecht allowed the bodies to be used by the school for practice," Ms. Buchanan said.

Carlow University officials in a statement yesterday denied there was any kind of trade agreement with Dr. Wecht for use of its labs.

"Carlow provided facilities to Dr. Wecht for the purpose of teaching autopsy procedure as part of the course of instruction in the university's forensic sciences program," the statement read. "At no time, did Carlow trade laboratory space for cadavers."

The college said it believed Dr. Wecht was acting lawfully and that the autopsies were performed as part of his private practice and had no relation to his duties as the county coroner.

Ms. Buchanan said that a body in Pennsylvania should not be autopsied unless the cause of death is unclear. In these instances with the unclaimed bodies, there was no need for an autopsy, she said.

The government also alleged that:

- Dr. Wecht used county resources, including office equipment, vehicles and employees, for his private business. Ms. Buchanan could not put a dollar figure on the amount of money involved in that part of the charges.

- Dr. Wecht overbilled his private clients. The indictment charges him with having false travel agency bills generated that inflated the cost of his airfare, and at the same time, charging his clients a \$90 "airport limousine charge," when he really traveled to Pittsburgh International Airport in a county-owned vehicle.

- Dr. Wecht asked his clients to pay his travel expenses in checks made out to him personally, and not to his company, allowing him to not report those in his business proceeds, and instead take them as "pocket money."

- Dr. Wecht asked employees of the coroner's office to perform personal errands for him on county time, including dog-walking, picking up personal mail, purchasing sporting goods and hauling away trash.

- Dr. Wecht used county resources, including equipment and employees, to organize political events and to solicit campaign donations for both himself and his son, Allegheny County Common Pleas Court Judge David Wecht.

According to the indictment, Dr. Wecht's private business generated more than \$8.75 million in gross income between 1997 and 2004. Dr. Wecht, the sole owner of the business, earned more than \$4.65 million in officer compensation during that same time frame.

He told the IRS that from 1998 to 2004, 100 percent of his time was devoted to his private business, the indictment alleges.

In addition to Dr. Wecht, two former coroner's office employees also were indicted yesterday. Dr. Leon Rozin, a pathologist and long-time associate of Dr. Wecht, was named in one-count indictment charging him with mail fraud. The government alleges that while providing private autopsy and consulting services for Butler and Washington counties, Dr. Rozin filed for mileage and travel reimbursements, even though he made the trip in someone else's vehicle.

Martin Dietz, who is representing Dr. Rozin in the case, said he had no comment.

George Hollis, a former chief histologist in the coroner's office was named nine-count indictment, charging him with failing to file tax returns from 2001 through 2004, making false statements and theft from an organization that receives federal funds.

Mr. Hollis' attorney could not be reached.

Chris Briese, the special agent in charge of the Pittsburgh FBI office, said yesterday that battling public corruption is the top priority of the FBI.

The U.S. attorney's office has for several months been investigating allegations of corruption within the Pittsburgh mayor's office, the coroner's office and the Allegheny County sheriff's office, where three high-ranking officials have been indicted.

The reaction to Dr. Wecht's indictment yesterday among his friends was one of regret.

Former county Chief Executive Jim Roddey, who helped create the Wecht Legal Defense Fund in May, said he hoped his friend will be able to recover from this.

Mr. Roddey, a Republican, defeated Dr. Wecht, a Democrat, in 1999 to become the county's first chief executive.

"First of all, I'm very sorry that this has happened," Mr. Roddey said of the indictment. "I hope he is found to be innocent of the charges."

But when told of the allegations against Dr. Wecht, Mr. Roddey said: "If he did that, that's

wrong, and he should have to account for that."

Mr. Roddey said he never saw any problems in the coroner's office.

"We saw evidence of [misusing county employees and resources] in other row offices, but we never saw anything that blatant in Cyril's office."

A longtime colleague of Dr. Wecht's, Dr. Michael Baden, the chief forensic pathologist for the New York State Police, was called to testify before the grand jury a few weeks ago. He would not say what he testified about. Dr. Baden did say he's never been involved with Dr. Wecht's private business, only with his work as the coroner and at Duquesne University, where Dr. Wecht heads the Cyril H. Wecht Institute of Forensic Science and Law.

"It saddens me greatly to hear of this," Dr. Baden said. "He's held in high regard by his colleagues."

Dr. Wecht, a past president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, is recognized as one of the outstanding forensic pathologists in the country, Dr. Baden said.

"I've always felt Allegheny County has been very lucky to have him as the coroner there," he said.

Defense attorney Rush said he was disappointed that the charges were lodged against what he called "one of the most distinguished forensic pathologists of our time, who, now at 74, is in the twilight of his career -- an extraordinary career at that."

Mr. Rush claimed the charges against his client "started with the fanciful allegations initially made against Dr. Wecht," by Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr.

"The district attorney was apparently able to convince the FBI and United States Attorney to undertake this protracted and, unfortunately, very public investigation."

Mr. Zappala, yesterday afternoon, issued a brief statement saying it would be inappropriate to comment on the case.

Mr. Rush expressed frustration yesterday that the indictment came down without advance notice. During a Jan. 5 meeting with Ms. Buchanan and her staff, defense lawyers asked that they be told in advance of any forthcoming indictment and then be given a chance to request review of it by Justice Department officials in Washington before it was brought.

"We had a guarantee, which was reneged on," Mr. Rush said.

But Ms. Buchanan said there was never any such agreement.

"Dr. Wecht's defense lawyers were aware that charges would likely be presented before the end of January," she said.

She added that during the Jan. 5 meeting, she specifically rejected their request for review by the Department of Justice.

"What's frustrating is, we had a particular conversation about this," she said. "They were hoping to convince someone to persuade us to withhold the charges."

It's not unusual for the U.S. attorney's office to meet with defendants prior to indictment to give them an opportunity to talk about the evidence, Ms. Buchanan said.

Dr. Wecht's defense team plans to challenge the federal government's jurisdiction in the matter, saying that it has a "limited mandate," in criminal investigations that pertain to state and local politics.

"As a result, we believe that this indictment is unwarranted and fatally flawed," Mr. Rush said.

But Ms. Buchanan discounted that, saying that the charges listed in the indictment are clearly federal violations.

Mr. Rush said Dr. Wecht's defense team intends to fight the nature and scope of the investigation.

"He's been around a long time, and he's been through a lot," Mr. Rush said. "He's a fighter."

"Moreover, we will mount a legal assault on the investigative tactics of the substantive charges contained within the indictment."

He would not discuss those tactics.

Dr. Wecht's arraignment is set for 9:30 a.m. on Feb. 10.

(Staff writers Dennis B. Roddy and Jonathan D. Silver contributed to this report. Paula Reed Ward can be reached at pward@post-gazette.com or 412-263-2620.)

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